Disaster (Dark) Tourism

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Abstract

Rural and regional communities and industry are disproportionately impacted by natural and human-made disasters. Following disasters there can also be a new tourism market in the form of 'dark tourism', which can either assist or hinder communities; possibly create further potential illegal activity (such as trespassing); or provide further opportunities to life-threating situations or ongoing health risks (through accessing unstable or dangerous areas). A number of different case studies are explored throughout this paper to highlight these issues, including Australia's deadliest town, Wittenoom in Western Australia; 'storm-chasers', such as those driving the streets to film tornado damage in Armidale, NSW while the storm was still present; tourism around bushfires in rural and regional Australia; as well as exploring similar disaster tourism cases internationally. As a part of this, the paper explores the role of the media in advertising, and possibly, creating disaster tourism opportunities. The publicization of sites of disaster inevitably creates interest in an area; however, this does not mean that tourists travelling to such sites should be labelled as 'dark' or 'deviant', many people travel to see if they can help, or to reflect on the fragility of life.

Keywords: disaster tourism; dark tourism; bushfires; storm chasers; deadly town

Introduction

Rural and regional communities and industry are disproportionately impacted by natural disasters such as fires, drought and floods, as well as human-made disasters. Wright and Sharpley (2018) draw on previous research to argue that the "actual event is not a disaster; rather, it is the degree of its impact on society that defines a disaster as such" (p. 164). This argument is supported when considering governmental definitions of 'disaster'. For example, the United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNDRR) defines a disaster as:

> A serious disruption of the functioning of a community or a society at any scale due to hazardous events interacting with conditions of exposure, vulnerability and capacity, leading to one or more of the following: human, material, economic and environmental losses and impacts. (para. 1)

It is the loss that creates a niche for dark tourism – particularly the loss of life. As such, post-disasters often become new 'dark tourism' locations. The term 'dark tourism' was coined in 2000 by Lennon and Foley and broadly refers to travel to tourist sites that provide "representations of death, disaster or atrocity for pedagogical and commercial purposes" (Walby & Piche, 2011, p. 452). Disaster tourism is one subset of the broader umbrella term of dark tourism, where death, disaster and atrocity are frequently present. The phenomenon of dark tourism, and 'disaster tourism' "are becoming an increasingly pervasive feature within the contemporary tourism landscape" (Stone, 2006, pp. 145-146). Kelman and Dodds (2009) define disaster tourism as "travel for predominantly recreational or leisure purposes to see areas affected by a disaster" (p. 272). There are a growing number of famous disaster tourism sites around the globe, including the urban cases of Ground Zero in New York or the destruction caused by Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans. Sites in regional locations are also growing in prominence, with the Chernobyl's Exclusion Zone being internationally renowned. While there are disaster sites created by intentional criminal acts, such as Ground Zero, this is not the focus of this paper, with the exception of bushfires that are a result of arson.

Gotham (2017) adopts the notion of the "society of the spectacle" developed by French theorist Guy Debord to explore the fascination with disaster tourism. Essentially, "disaster-devastated neighbourhoods" become "spectacles of tourist consumption" (Gotham, 2017, p. 128). In some instances, this consumer demand is leveraged by local councils and/or businesses (which might not be local) to 'stage' and 'frame' a collective understanding of the disaster. In some cases, this staging can be seen as unauthentic by the local community, raising questions of the ethics of such tours. The growing interest in participating in disaster tourism can be partially attributed to a desire to see the spectacular, but also as a marker of prestige and success:

> […] visiting places where massive physical destruction has occurred has for many people become a marker of prestige and status. […] The constitution of disaster-devastated neighborhoods as tourist sites reflects conscious and organized efforts to

> capitalize on the tourist's desire for the dramatic, spectacular, and the unusual. (Gotham, 2017, p. 133)

One of the 'spectacular', and unique aspects of disaster tourism, is that in many cases, it is temporary – that is, once a location has 'recovered' or been 'rebuilt' the associations with death and destruction may fade causing tourists to stop visiting (Wright & Sharpley, 2018). However, even when sites are rebuilt (or landscapes recover) from disaster they can still become places of commemoration, attracting tourists interested in the history of the site. As such, these sites transform from 'disaster tourism' locations into broader 'dark tourism' destinations. Other sites will never be rebuilt and can thus remain as sites of both disaster and dark tourism – such as Pompeii and Wittenoom in Australia (to be discussed later).

This paper is divided into two main sections. The first explores existing research into various types of disaster tourism, including the motivations of tourists; the impact of such tourism on the victims, communities, environment and tourists themselves; and the role of the media in promoting and facilitating disaster tourism. The second section will explore these issues in relation to three rural and regional Australian cases of disaster tourism that have received little scholarship, although they have featured heavily in media accounts of disaster tourism.

Disaster tourism

The "niche segment" of tourists that are travelling to 'dark' sites where disasters and catastrophes have occurred is rapidly growing, and travel agencies and hotels are providing tourists with information on "horrifying disasters" (Marton et al., 2020, p. 137). Tourists worldwide travel to witness post-disaster scenes of earthquakes, hurricanes, bushfires and floods. In some cases, tourism occurs spontaneously, with people independently travelling to witness the devastation. For example, after an earthquake in 2009 killed 308 people, injured 1,500 and destroyed much of L'Aquila (the capital of the Abruzzo region in central Italy), leaving the majority of the population homeless, tourists arrived impromptu within days to take photographs of the destroyed city (Wright & Sharpley, 2018). The media, reporting on the tourism, argued that "the earthquake had achieved what the regional tourism authorities long failed to do in establishing the city as a popular tourist destination", emphasising that "visitors were attrati dal'lorrore della città distrutta (trans. 'attracted to the horror of the destroyed city')" (Wright & Sharpley, 2018, p. 161). In this case, the media played an important role in directing the attention of the tourists to one specific site of the town – the collapse of a student house. Here, tourists were reported to have taken photographs of the site while laughing and shouting – causing pain for local individuals that had lost family and friends during the earthquake (Sharpley & Wright, 2018). The media focus on the student house further upset the local residents who believed that tourists misunderstood the extent of the damage and impact on the whole city by only being interested in that site.

At other times, tourism officials and tour operators establish new "disaster tours" to capitalise on the interest in disaster sites, creating revenue but also control over how tourists experience the disaster. For example, in the months after Hurricane Katrina, Gray Line New

Orleans Bus Tours took tourists through the most devastated areas of the city as part of its "Hurricane Katrina: America's Worst Catastrophe!" tour (Gotham, 2017). The number of tours expanded, with seven companies offering tours within five years of the hurricane, each of the tours "employed apocalyptic rhetoric emphasizing obliteration, annihilation, and ruin to describe the flooded neighborhoods" (Gotham, 2017, p. 130). As such:

> Bus companies re-signified New Orleans neighborhoods affected by Katrina as places to visit, constituting visitors as passive consumers, and reconstructing disaster as a consumable spectacle. Bus tours operated as technologies and institutions for the commodification of viewing neighborhood devastation and signified the cultivation of new opportunities to profit from tragic events. (Gotham, 2017, p. 130)

The tours promised tourists "authenticity of local eyewitnesses" with tour guides weaving their own personal accounts with the storm into the tour (Pezzullo, 2009, p. 34). More formalised tourism at disaster sites offers governments or businesses the opportunity to reframe the narrative into one of "hope, survival and renewal" (Miller, 2008, p. 128 cited in Tucker et al., 2017, p. 309), as well as limiting access to dangerous locations and (hopefully) limiting the level of imposition felt by local communities. Leading tourists through disaster ravaged areas provides an 'authentic' immersive experience for tourists, elucidating powerful emotive responses to the 'otherness' of the disaster. Indeed, tourists may have an affective response that can lead to lasting impacts on visitors and how they relate and interact with the space (Martini & Buda, 2020) and notions of disaster. In addition to the obvious visual stimuli, many tourists visiting disaster sites are affected by the odour, or the silence, which cannot be easily replicated by the media or museums (Pezzullo, 2009).

Similar tours operated in Christchurch, New Zealand, where one company promoted "we have never stopped operating and have lived every single earthquake; You can't get more experienced than this!" (cited in Tucker et al., 2017, p. 314). Tour companies take tourists to various locations impacted by the earthquakes – essentially focusing on the 'dark' sites of destruction. One company, the Red Bus Tours, took over 37,000 local and international tourists on these tours over a two-and-a-half-year period, including locals from Christchurch that were not as badly impacted by the earthquake (Tucker et al., 2017, p. 315). Organised tourism allows operators to develop their own ethical code that can enable "responsible travel", although many are criticised of falling short of addressing ethical concerns, and instead focus on the health and safety of just the tourists (Kelman & Dodds, 2009, p. 279).

Human-made disasters similarly attract tourists, and there are an increasing number of 'deadly towns' being promoted across the globe. For example, Chernobyl in Ukraine has long been classified as a popular 'dark tourism' site where "tourists are excited to wear protective clothes, to grab their own dosimeter to measure radioactivity", with "no thoughts" to the physical and psychological health risks (Marton et al., 2020, p. 144). On the 26 April 1986 the world's worst nuclear accident occurred at the Chernobyl nuclear power plant in the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic (now Ukraine). Chernobyl can be "viewed as a heterotopia – a ritual space that exists outside of time – in which time is not only arrested but also notions of Otherness are consumed in a post-apocalyptic place" (Stone, 2013, p. 79).

Despite the health and safety concerns with the radioactive "fallout" of the site, "illegal tourism to Chernobyl […] flourished" (Stone, 2013, p. 79).

To eliminate illegal and dangerous tourism, the Ukrainian government sanctioned official tours to the site in 2011. These tours have stringent rules designed to keep tourists safe and ensure ethical, respectful behaviour. For example, tourists must be over 18 years of age and wear clothes that completely cover their body. Tourists are prohibited from eating, drinking or smoking in the open air within the zone, touching buildings or trees, gathering and eating food found in the abandoned settlements, sitting or putting personal belongings on the ground, and no objects may be taken from the site (Chernobyl Tour, 2021a). Pictures and videos can only be taken when the guide gives permission, and visitors are asked to be mindful of what they say and how they behave on the tour. Tourists can, however, take home purchased souvenirs of their tour, including various 'airs' of Chernobyl (which the site promotes as "Safely canned Air from the Exclusion Zone is a must have for radiophiles and a cool gift for radiophobes" (Chernobyl Tour, 2021b)) and many other glowing ('radioactive') themed shirts, mugs, maps, hats, pens, magnets, keychains and lighters.

Another area impacted by radiation is the exclusion zone around the leaking Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant in Japan. In March 2011, a magnitude 9.0 earthquake and then tsunami hit north-eastern Japan. In addition to the destruction of several towns, and the deaths of thousands, the power plant was damaged causing radioactive contamination of the surrounding areas. The cleaning and recovery is estimated to take 30 years. Unlike Chernobyl, this area is not formally controlled. Indeed, researchers Martini and Sharma (2022) found "no roadblocks or police patrolling the area, only big radiation exposure counters every few kilometres, to remind us that this was no normal trip to the Japanese countryside" (p. 1). Despite the nearby physical destruction caused by the tsunami in Miyagi and Iwate, the towns near the Fukushima power plant had an additional layer of 'darkness' and disaster, because the building remained intact, but devoid of life, "only decontamination workers, figures in white overalls, were sometimes visible. Otherwise, the towns still looked lived in, if unkempt, as if the residents had disappeared into thin air" (Martini & Sharma, 2022, p. 2). This experience was described as being 'sublime' because it was beyond comprehension and evoked feelings of awe and terror – with real fear of radiation contamination. Within two months, tourists were reported visiting the sites damaged by the tsunami, including the exclusion zone, and shortly after formal tours began, although those engaging in these tours were mostly Japanese tourists or international journalists or academics (Martini & Sharma, 2022). Eighteen months later, one company suggested that the exclusion zone should be opened as a 'nuclear village' with formal tours, however, these plans were abandoned due to lack of community support. As such, sites of disaster, whether natural or human made, appear to intrigue people, acting as an allure for tourism.

Motivations of tourists

There are a variety of reasons why someone might travel to a post-disaster location: they may want to aid in the recovery of a location; have a personal connection to the place that they need to check on or try to help protect/restore (family, friends, property, spiritual

connection, etc.); for empathetic or memorial reasons; they may be curious; or they may have nefarious motives such as looting. 'Curious' tourists have recently received considerable media attention and have been labelled as 'crisis tourists' (Barilla, 2024). According to Rucińska (2016):

> The natural disaster tourism is a niche within tourism, and dark tourism in general because it is not mass tourism. It requires from tourists strong motivation to observe and find destructed areas and people who experienced natural disasters as well as staying in the areas of risk. (pp. 1459-1460)

In 1957 Fritz and Mathewson conceptualised five categories of people, or 'convergers', that travel to disaster sites (although these categories are not exclusive, and visitors may fall into several of these categories): (1) the returnees, (2) the anxious, (3) the helpers, (4) the curious, and (5) the exploiters. The returnees are those people who live within the disaster zone and return to their home and/or community and are motivated by a desire to locate and help others; assess their losses; to retrieve, guard, and salvage their property; and to return to familiar surroundings. Similarly, anxious tourists are those motivated by personal connections to the location (such as family or friends). Helpers are motivated by assisting the community and are frequently referred to in more modern literature as 'volunteer tourists'. The curious are:

> […] excited by unusual circumstances, by events which cannot readily be fitted into or explained by previous experience. Disasters are events which are inherently unusual and dramatic; they excite attention and require investigative activity if they are to be coped with and understood. Viewed in this fashion, the curiosity manifested in disasters is simply an example of the normal human tendency to be attracted by and to inquire into any phenomenon which is strange. (Fritz & Mathewson, 1957, p. 46)

As such, the 'curious' would include modern concepts of dark tourists, and indeed are the only category of tourists that match Kelman and Dodds' (2009) definition of disaster tourism. While such tourists were often labelled as 'ghoulish', research indicates that individuals travel from a "need to assimilate happenings which lie outside" their "frame of reference or realm of experience, and which may affect [their] future safety" (Fritz & Mathewson, 1957, p. 49). As such, curiosity acts as both a push and pull for tourists – that "sense of 'ought to see'" for themselves, rather than "simply vicariously knowing about it" (Rittichainuwat, 2008, p. 423). Fritz and Mathewson's (1957) final category, the exploiters, refers to those seeking private gain from public misfortune, including looting, stealing, profiteering, mob violence, and crime.

In recent years, the media have been quick to focus on the 'curious' category and tend to argue that certain tourists are motivated by a desire to feel excitement, pleasure and heightened emotions that are linked with the prospect of visiting a restricted or prohibited site (Addeo et al., 2021, p. 213). These sites are mysterious, and may even have an element of danger, such as tours of Chernobyl. As such, these sites may not be of interest to everyone. Tourists who travel unprompted immediately after a disaster are also more likely to be

labelled as ‘morbid’ and viewed as being motivated by voyeurism or a fascination in death (Wright & Sharpley, 2018, p. 165).

Despite this portrayal, a Hungarian study found that the majority of people would not travel to a site of a natural catastrophe (87% of a sample size of 206), and 73% would actively avoid such destinations (Marton et al., 2020, p. 150). In contrast, Rittichainuwat (2008) found that ten out of twelve Thai tourists would travel domestically to a tsunami disaster site because they believed it might be a ‘once in a lifetime’ experience, although it was suggested that this might be related to the cleanliness of the beach and water following the tsunami, rather than the damage caused. While these studies offer contradictory results, it is important to note that Rittichainuwat’s study was conducted almost three decades ago and had a much smaller sample size. However, there may also be a difference in cultural approaches as Rittichainuwat (2008) found that it was the Thai (local) tourists that were interested in sites of natural disaster. In contrast, inbound Scandinavia tourists to Thailand showed no motivation to visit disaster sites.

More broadly, research indicates that disaster tourists’ motivations include empathy, guilt, education and remembrance, similar to other dark tourism sites. Those people more likely to travel to sites of catastrophe, or death, were within the younger generation of 18-25 years of age (Marton et al., 2020); or younger than 20 years of age (Rittichainuwat, 2008). Researchers have also discovered that anxiety and uncertainty motivate many individuals to seek out ‘dark’ sites that allow them to confront death and/or existential predicament (Biran et al., 2014; Zhang, 2022). At post disaster sites, tourists can reflect upon the power of nature and its impact on the mortality and fragility of life. Although it is important to note, that like other dark tourism sites, disaster tourism might be just one of the sites or motivations for visitation to a location. That is, many tourists will also visit other local attractions that focus on culture or heritage, rather than destruction (Biran et al., 2014).

While Marton et al. (2020) found that most of their sample would not travel to a disaster site, other research has tried to discover more about the patterns of tourists following a disaster. Fukui and Ohe (2019) conducted a study of the March 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake, including the subsequent large-scale tsunami that ravaged approximately 500-km of coastline and devastated Iwate, Miyagi and Fukushima prefectures. This natural disaster took 18,729 lives with 2,666 people missing, and more than 350,000 houses were half or completely destroyed. Focusing on the Iwate Prefecture, Fukui and Ohe (2019) collected statistics on the number of ‘ordinary’ tourists and volunteer tourists (those tourists that are motivated to travel to help rebuild an area) before and after the earthquake. The research revealed that in the first month or two following the disaster, tourists avoided the area in respect for victims, but that overnight ‘leisure’ tourism from non-locals increased substantially between June and September 2011 as people became curious of the impacts of the disaster, travelling considerable distances to witness first-hand the damage. Tourism to Iwate then dropped again to ‘normal’ around six months after the tsunami, reinforcing the short-lived nature of disaster sites as tourism destinations. Rucińska (2016, p. 1460) argued

that tourism to places of natural disaster usually lasts up to two years after the event, after which time it strongly decreases.

Impacts on victims, communities, the environment and tourists themselves

The impacts of disaster tourism on victims, communities, the environment and even tourists themselves are far-reaching. While these impacts or not always negative, these are the ones that are most likely to be highlighted by the media, and unfortunately may be the ones most likely to impact upon rural communities. Following a disaster, it is common for individuals to want to look at the damage creating 'accidental' tourism. That is, without the allure of formal tours, these individuals will still travel to witness the destruction. Following the earthquakes in Christchurch, New Zealand, blog-writer, Margaret Agnew, coined the phrase "rubble-necking" to describe "the tourists who like to drive through disaster zones gawping" (Agnew, 2011 cited in Tucker et al., 2017, p. 315). In addition to upsetting local individuals that have been traumatised, such tourism can become a burden on the recovery of the area as tourists consume already stretched necessities such as food, water, and medical care or luxuries such as restaurants, soap, or entertainment (Kelvin & Dodds, 2009, p. 277). It has also been argued that immediate tourism (even those looking to help locals) can impede relief efforts (Leyla, 2023). The local environment can be further damaged by impromptu and unorganised tourism. For example, tourists driving through flood water following the 2004 Wellington, New Zealand, floods increased property damage causing more work for local recovery processes. Tourists may also engage in illegal behaviour, such as stealing items or trespassing on property in order to 'get a better look'. This type of behaviour may be more common in rural and regional areas, where houses on properties may be abandoned allowing 'easy access' for thieves and tourists.

Even purposeful or organised tourism can still lead to community fatigue and conflict. For example, while official tours of Hurricane Katrina ran without controversy for many years, by 2012, restrictions were placed on the tours limiting the number of passengers and constraining the tour route to main streets in respect for the neighbourhood's desire for privacy. Locals were reported by the media as being "fed up" with tourists treating the place like "some sideshow" (Vanessa Gueringer cited in CBS News, 2016, para. 11). Similarly, the formal tours of Christchurch also received backlash from local residents who viewed the tours (and tourists) as insensitive (Tucker et al., 2017).

In some cases, disaster tourism can lead to tourist injuries or fatalities. For example, when disaster warnings are issued and promoted through the media, some tourists will travel to the site in an attempt to witness the event. For example, in March 1980, Mount St. Helens in the United States had a series of volcanic explosions, leading to warnings about the area. Instead of deterring tourists, the warnings resulted in increased tourism activity, and when the volcano erupted a month later, approximately a third of the 57 fatalities were tourists that had travelled to watch the volcano (Kelman & Dodds, 2009). Similarly, people travelled to the beach in both India (in 2004) and Thailand (in 2005) to witness the tsunami arrival, and private companies in America offer storm-chasing 'holidays' (Kelman & Dodds, 2009). Dedicated social media pages are also available providing individuals with information on

storms – while most people use these pages as a warning system, for others these sites provide information on where the next storm will hit, enabling them to travel to witness the potential disaster.

Despite these negative impacts of disaster tourism, research has highlighted that there is some benefit to visiting dark tourism sites of natural disasters. For example, Zhang (2022) argued that visiting such sites enabled visitors to 'depersonalise' themselves as individuals and consider themselves as a 'human', or in other words to see themselves as "being small and fragile, being resilient and great, being benevolent, being destructive, and having uncertain fate" (p. 5). At the same time, visitors can understand human resilience, and the ability for individuals and communities to overcome disasters. It can also make visitors appreciate their own lives more, to re-connect to their life (Wright & Sharpley, 2018) and enhance social bonds. There is also an educational benefit in witnessing locations impacted by disaster (Kelman & Dodds, 2009, p. 279), or even subsequent museum or gallery exhibitions. Educational benefits include understanding how to minimise future disaster risks; how to help future victims; and emphasising the need for empathy and support post-disaster.

One of the main tasks for managers of dark tourism sites is to try to connect tourists emotionally, not only with the location, but also encourage them to confront destruction and uncertain fate. As a part of this, the narrative often centres, not just on the loss and destruction, but also the ability to be resilient and re-build communities; and, as such offers "positive societal meanings and outcomes beyond the role of dark tourism as a bearer of commemoration and historical memory, and a narrowly perceived impression of being sensationalised, bizarre and macabre aspects" (Zhang, 2022, p. 8). Fostering a sense of human identity at post disaster tourism sites will encourage tourists to empathise and confront mortality.

Volunteer tourism (outside the scope of this paper) can also be beneficial for local communities, where volunteers travel to disaster sites to help rebuild the location. The promotion of disaster tourism not only attracts volunteers to help rebuild, but also brings in revenue and attention to the disaster. According to Kelman and Dodds (2009), such tourism "can assist in the short-term and long-term recovery efforts by providing resources for reconstruction and a rapid basis for re-establishing or improving livelihoods" (p. 277). Some victims of disasters may decide to offer personalised tours (for a fee) to share their experiences which may be cathartic but also help financially.

For some communities, tourism provides local communities with the knowledge that their trauma will not be forgotten. Disaster tourism can also help local communities to emotionally recover from the trauma through sharing their experience with tourists (Prayag, 2016). Longer term tourism also offers opportunities of remembrance, which can be very important for communities (Kunwar & Karki, 2020). As such, through tourism the memory of the disaster can be "kept alive" (Tucker et al., 2017, p. 310), offering memorialisation opportunities for those directly impacted by the disaster. Further, tourism narratives can change, from the 'disaster' to the 'phoenix' revival of a location showcasing the resilience of the community and providing a 'positive', 'futuristic' dimension to the 'dark' destination

(Miller et al., 2017). In the case of rural and regional locations, this often involves imagery of the rural dystopia created from the disaster evolving (or reverting back) to the rural idyll with images focusing of the tranquillity and beauty of the Australian 'outback'.

Role of the media

While disaster tourism has always existed, the increased prominence of the media has heightened curiosity around disaster tourism. Disasters are newsworthy stories, filled with dramatic images and stories, often reflecting the loss of life and property as well as feelings of fear and devastation from remaining victims. Through advertising disasters, the media essentially creates disaster tourism opportunities. As Sharpley and Wright (2018) have stated "once a disaster has been publicised, it becomes an attraction to those who, for whatever reason, wish to travel to gaze upon it" (p. 336). As such, the media can be considered to provide a 'pull factor' for tourists visiting disaster sites (Biran et al., 2014). Terms such as 'disaster' and 'recovery' are frequently used by different social groups to further their own goals and prerogatives (Gotham, 2017, p. 129). The media in particular use these terms to create a spectacle that people want to witness, either firsthand by travelling to the site or through mediated images pushed through media outlets or later displayed in art galleries and museums.

In addition to utilising terminology and imagery designed to entice viewers, the expanding nature of social media makes the "consumption of death and disaster events immediately accessible, and unfiltered" (Martini & Buda, 2020, p. 684). The unfiltered reporting helps to convey the horror and pain felt by communities impacted by disasters, and while the intention is to connect audiences with the stories, there is also the unintended effect of creating tourism allure as well as perpetrating common myths around disaster sites. The reports focus on the dramatic, tragedy, chaos, courage, heroes and villains (Sharpley & Wright, 2018). Consequently:

> […] media reporting of disasters often presents a distorted, mythical, and even inaccurate picture […], but one which may appeal to media audiences, including tourists who then perhaps visit the site to verify those stories themselves. Indeed, the social disruption that is the outcome of a disaster, perhaps embellished by media stories, transforms a disaster site into a potential dark or disaster tourism destination. (Sharpley & Wright, 2018, p. 339)

Such reports may not be accurate, especially in the immediate aftermath of a disaster where the 'real' number of casualties are unknown. Where such reports are later proven to be inaccurate the initial myths surrounding the disaster are often the ones that are 'remembered' more clearly and promote tourism activities.

For rural and regional areas, the media provides a catch-22 situation when disasters are reported. To expand, "it is the mass media which indirectly indicates the natural disaster destinations and directions of travelling informing about the location of natural disasters in a unique region or even in a particular place" (Rucińska, 2016, p. 1460). As such, without the

media, many rural and regional locations impacted by disasters would not attract tourists simply because people would not be aware of the disaster. On the one hand, such media attention can create a burden for local residents, where tourists come to see the damage, either causing further damage themselves, or else creating further barriers to the recovery phase. In contrast, the media can also help isolated areas simply by providing information about the event. Disasters in rural and regional areas face additional difficulties with limited services and material available to rebuild and recover. Indeed, Fukui and Ohe (2019) have argued that recovery can fail to happen in rural areas, which would be improbable in urban locations. To help rural locations recover from disaster, Fukui and Ohe (2019) suggest that social media can be used to promote tourism, and in particular volunteer tourism. Their research raises a number of critical issues that are relevant to 'curious' tourists. For example, not only can the media (and particularly social media) promote information about a disaster site (and therefore encourage tourism), but it can also promote information on whether the site is safe to visit (although this may not always be heeded, as will be discussed later).

Disaster tourism in rural and regional Australia

The following section highlights three sites of disasters that have occurred in rural and regional Australia, each attracting different levels of tourism. All three cases highlight the impulse of tourists to visit a site shortly after a disaster, even ignoring safety precautions in an effort to witness something 'dark' first-hand. Similarly, all three cases were promoted in the media, and in the case of Wittenoom, this media attention had created additional tourism to the site. Unlike some of the above international examples, there have been no 'formal tours' associated with each of these disasters, although natural disasters have featured in museums and art galleries as a way to remember and promote education about climate change and disaster management. Tourists traveling to these sites post disaster have demonstrated a strong motivation to experience the impacts of disasters, sometimes placing themselves at risk in the process (Rucińska, 2016).

Storm-chasers and tornados

Storms, and in particular tornados, have the potential to create widespread destruction and death. Despite this, some people become 'storm chasers' to document the path of a storm. In 2013 the El Reno tornado in rural Oklahoma, United States, was the first tornado to kill professional storm chasers (Jones, 2016). In addition to 'professional' storm chasers, 'recreational' storm chasers are growing in popularity, with individuals travelling across the world to join "organized and guided tours chasing extreme meteorological events, especially tornadoes" (Xu et al., 2012, p. 269). According to Xu et al. (2012), such recreational interest was facilitated by the movie Twister (1996) and the television documentary series Storm Chasers (2007). Unlike short bus tours of Katrina, recreational storm-chasing tours in the United States last anywhere between one to two weeks (Xu et al., 2012). As such, storm chasing tours appear to be the main purpose of a 'holiday'. In addition to professional and recreational tourists there are also opportunistic people that 'tour' sites of devastation from storms.

At approximately 10pm on 14th October 2021 a tornado occurred in the regional town of Armidale, New South Wales. The tornado travelled 42 kilometres, clearing a four-kilometre-wide path through rural, residential and educational areas that brought down trees, flipped cars, broke power lines (resulting in 6,400 residents experiencing a lack of power), destroyed houses (eleven had to be completely removed), and damaged more than 1,000 houses as well as buildings at the University of New England (many of which had to be demolished as a result). The tornado was unexpected, and in response to common beliefs that tornados are rare in Australia, Hugh McDowell, a meteorologist at the Bureau of Meteorology "said tornadoes in Australia aren't as rare as people might think, but may occur in rural areas and go unwitnessed" (cited in Singhal, 2021, para. 12). Consequently, rural areas are more likely to be impacted by tornados but receive less media attention. Indeed, in the reporting of the Armidale tornado, most of the media reports also provided accounts of storm damage to Sydney on the same evening. One of the reasons that the Armidale tornado did receive media coverage was because of the immediate, unfiltered footage uploaded to social media.

During the storm residents were quick to record footage of the tornado, making the disaster an instant social media 'hit'. According to The Northern Daily Leader, "A video capturing the tornado was watched thousands of times on social media and television - to the surprise of the local who filmed it" (2023, para. 4). While many of these films were taken from the safety of people's homes, there were some people who took to the streets to film the locations that had suffered the most damage. For example, one local posted their encounter on YouTube, telling viewers:

> A friend and I were out taking photos of the storm. It got too close and started hailing golf-balls. I sought shelter under a bypass until it moved on, and then I decided to chase it a little further. On my way to my next location, I encountered the damage the Tornado had left. So I set my camera up in the car and set it to video. Heart-breaking. (cjdexter, 2021)

The video goes for eight minutes and shows the destruction of the town from the safety of the car. A language warning has been placed on the video, and the author expressed disbelief at the damage. The video was posted before a tornado had been confirmed, and as such was labelled as a 'potential tornado'. As of October 2024, the video has 22,505 views. Driving around the streets while the storm was still going (albeit in reduced intensity) had the potential to cause further injuries and impede disaster recovery.

In addition, images (and videos) depicting the damage were shared across media outlets nationwide. The images show houses without roofs, trees crushing cars and buildings, piles of debris, damaged fences and street signs lying on the ground. Some of the images depict 'normal' everyday events following the tornado, for example an Australian post worker delivering mail in front of a house with its roof partially torn off and lots of tree debris. These images, and footage, provided an online form of 'rubble-necking' and demonstrate the curiosity that people have towards sites of disaster. Indeed, there has been

little media coverage of the 'recovery' of the region (which is still ongoing three years later) – the focus was mainly on the scenes of destruction.

Bushfires

Bushfires are a reoccurring natural disaster in many parts of the world causing widespread death and destruction. As such they are 'newsworthy' and comprehensively reported on the news accompanied with graphic dystopian images. Reports focus on the loss of lives (both human and animals) as well as property damage. Bushfires cause intense devastation, chaos and death within (mainly) rural and regional communities. Like other types of disasters, bushfires significantly impact upon the existing tourism industry, as well as create new tourism opportunities. Cioccio and Michael (2007) argued that the Victorian (Australia) summer fires of 2003 "were a disaster for the regional tourism industry that was unprecedented in its scale" (p. 2). Tourists who were present when the fires began quickly evacuated, while future tourists cancelled their plans, impacting 'normal' tourism for at least a year, "leaving the tourism trade with only the curiosity factor of a blackened landscape" (Cioccio & Michael, 2007, p. 3).

Not all bushfires provide this curiosity factor. Rather, it is the catastrophic fires that cause intense media scrutiny and 'curious' tourists. The Victorian 2003 fires were a key example of this, although there was limited mention of 'disaster tourists' in the media. Almost three decades later, however, the 'Black Summer' bushfires in Australia in 2019-2020 were reportedly attracting such tourists. These bushfires burned 17 million hectares of land, caused the death of thirty-three people (including nine firefighters), destroyed approximately 3,000 properties and injured or killed over one billion animals (Heritage Manager, 2021). Intense media coverage showcased the devastation caused by the bushfires to the nation, and to the world, and in January 2020, journalist Erin Lyons predicted:

> Apocalyptic scenes of charred land, dead animals and skies blanketed in smoke are not the typical visuals tourists associate with a holiday in Australia - but they could encourage a new type of traveller to look our way. … could the destruction and devastation attract a different wave of tourism - dark tourists - to the impacted areas? (paras. 1 and 5)

Within the article, experts were quick to point out that tourism to bushfire affected sites should not be called 'dark tourists' because their "motivations are totally different" (Gabby Walters cited in Lyons, 2020, para. 10). Rather than wanting to see the disaster, local and national visitors would be more likely to want to visit to help and support the community. Specifically, "no Australian wants to be seen as a rubberneck, as a ghoulish character turning up to these place [sic] to have sneaky look" (Lyons, 2020, para. 15). International visitors, however, were tarnished as 'dark tourists' or 'sensation seekers' with the belief that they would be likely to take selfies in front of the devastation because they aren't "emotionally connected" to the tragedy (Gabby Walters cited in Lyons, 2020, para. 14).

While there is resistance to 'sensation seeking' or 'disaster tourism', communities affected most by bushfires may find that tourism is necessary to restore economic prosperity to the location. Terry Robertson, the CEO of Destination Gippsland (a town located in Victoria's south-east) told the media that any form of tourism, dark included, would be welcomed because it was seen as a form of monetary assistance:

> We need to be respectful. We won't discourage or encourage (dark tourism) but if it's handled appropriately visitation to those areas is welcome as long as it's done in a way that doesn't harm the environment, and isn't unsafe. (cited in Lyons, 2020, para. 27)

The possibility of such tourism to restore the economy was quickly extinguished with the emergence of COVID-19 and lockdowns. The Australian border was rapidly closed to international tourists, and even local areas were quickly locked down meaning that 'tourism' was almost non-existent for two years across Australia. As such, by the time tourism began to return many of the areas had regenerated to some extent, thus limiting 'dark tourists' or 'sensation' seekers.

Despite this, other forms of tourism relating to bushfires became promoted. In 2020 the media announced that the National Museum of Australia in Canberra was collecting images, videos and objects from across Australia to display in a Black Summer exhibit. The announcement of the exhibit was welcomed by those rural and regional communities affected by bushfires, because they wanted people to remember the loss and destruction caused by the fires. The National Museum of Australia showcased the Black Summer display as part of a wider Great Southern Land exhibition. Several natural disasters are displayed within the exhibit, including the Black Summer bushfires, Victoria's Black Saturday bushfires, the Canberra blazes of 2003 and Darwin's Cyclone Tracey. While it is recognised that the exhibit is "macabre", it has been designed to stimulate conversations and reminders of the need for governments and communities to become resilient to natural disasters and redress climate change. Some rural locations have taken steps to exhibit their own experiences of bushfires in the local area. For example, a moving exhibit, Black Summer and Beyond, which showcased images from the Macleay region was exhibited across three small rural towns in the region to enable multiple locations to commemorate the devastation (Pascoe, 2020). Such exhibits empower local people to tell their own story and reflect on their past. It also offers tourists insight into what befell the town.

The media has played a key role in disseminating information about potential bushfire tourism in rural and regional Australia. While it is difficult to assess whether disaster tourism actually occurred in bushfire devasted areas, especially due to the 'shutdowns' caused by the covid pandemic, it is clear that the media raised awareness of the disasters and created controversy around disaster tourism. Lyons (2020) reported that local communities were understanding of local or national tourists, because they were seen to be 'volunteer' or empathetic tourists. International tourists, on the other hand, were portrayed by spokespeople (and the media) as being ghoulish and motivated by a 'curiosity' that would be disrespectful to local communities. This belief contradicts Rittichainuwat's (2008) research, which found that locals were more inclined to participate in disaster tourism and international tourists

would instead travel to cultural or heritage tourism sites. There is ample theoretical research explaining why individuals (and communities) find it easier to demonise or blame the 'other', as such it is unsurprising that this narrative is promoted by the media when discussing 'disaster tourists' who are often portrayed as being deviant. Such narratives provide a distinctive, newsworthy, angle for media outlets covering the impacts of disasters.

Deadly towns: Wittenoom, Western Australia

In Australia, the town of Wittenoom provides tourists with an opportunity to visit a deadly ghost site. The site, like Chernobyl, continues to provide health risks to those that travel there; yet, unlike Chernobyl, tourism to the site is not restricted. The Aussie Towns website warns prospective tourists to beware of former asbestos mining town Wittenoom in rural Western Australia (WA), labelling it as "The Most Dangerous Town in Australia" (2021). Despite the dangers associated with visiting Wittenoom, tourists, and in particular "social media influencers and thrill-seekers eager to have a look at the erased community" continue to travel there (Lyons 2020, para. 19). In FodorsTravel, Wittenoom made the top ten tourist destinations (the fifth) to see Western Australia (O'Connell, 2020). Tourists continue to travel to Wittenoom despite the warning signs telling visitors that inhaling asbestos fibres may cause cancer.

Wittenoom is located 1,425 kilometres (880 miles) north of Perth and was mined for blue asbestos between the 1930s to 1966 when mining ceased because of health concerns. Because of the level of asbestos in the community, the government of Western Australia "made the unprecedented decision to phase down the town" in 1978 (Western Australia, Legislative Council, 2021). In 2007, the government revoked the status of Wittenoom as a township. On the 24th March 2022 the WA parliament passed the Wittenoom Closure Bill which enabled the compulsory acquisition of privately owned land in the area and provided the necessary regulations to allow the government to demolish all above-ground infrastructure "within the former town site to limit the attraction and opportunity for people to visit and stay in the area" (Western Australia, Legislative Council, 2021). By the end of September 2022 all residents had been removed from Wittenoom.

The town has been labelled as the most dangerous and deadly in Australia because over 2,000 people have died from asbestos-related diseases (Mining Editor, 2014), and it is estimated that 25 per cent of all men (approximately 7,000) that worked in the mines will die (Aussie Towns, 2021). One of the reasons that Wittenoom is so deadly is because much of the town's infrastructure used asbestos tailing (waste from the mill) in construction. For example, the town swimming pool had a fake beach created using asbestos tailing; the sand pits for children consisted of the tailing, as did the surfacing of the streets, footpaths, parking areas, local racecourse and school playgrounds (Mining Editor, 2014). Indeed, the asbestos waste was spread over the yards of houses to suppress red dust and mud and trucks carrying asbestos travelled past the local primary school and residential areas (Reid et al., 2007).

In addition to these deaths (and future deaths), the landscape has been irreparably damaged, with long-term consequences for the land and its traditional owners (the land was

returned to the Banjima people in 2014), many of whom are also suffering from asbestos-related diseases. The land was never cleaned and stands as a rural dystopia within the natural beauty of the landscape. The contaminated site comprises 50,000 hectares (120,000 acres) and blue asbestos fibres remain on the ground, in the air and in waterways, including the Fortescue River catchment, which will be impacted for hundreds of years if the area is not cleaned (Bennett, 2015).

Wittenoom highlights the extent to which tourists will travel to rural and remote areas to witness disaster sites. Further, the lack of tourism infrastructure does little to deter tourism. Tourists to Wittenoom explore the area, including the natural landscape, the mines and also homes within the town where "entire homes filled with household items and furniture now gather dust after residents were forced to flee and leave their belongings behind" (Scott, 2019, para. 7). Although the exact numbers of tourists are unknown, one media article reported 60 tourists a week "risked their lives to visit the 'ghost town'" (Towie, 2022, para. 9); while in 2006 a global engineering firm, GHD, reported that up to 40 tourists visited the townsite year-round, almost 100 cars drive through the town a day, and up to 200 Aboriginal people visit the gorges and townsite during ceremonies (cited in Bennett, 2015). Other anecdotal evidence suggests that people hire four-wheel drives to tick the site off their "bucket list" (Bodie Norman cited in Birch & Gorman, 2021) indicating that the driving motivation is curiosity.

While some tourists are aware (and concerned) about the health implications of visiting the town, most are not. Those that are concerned wear protective equipment (P2 mask or PPE), yet the vast majority of images on social media relating to Wittenoom show visitors without proper protective gear. For example, one photo featured a tourist wearing undies as a facemask to 'protect' themselves against breathing in any hazardous material (Zaunmayr, 2019). Similar images show people taking selfies in front of danger signs or at the entrance of the former blue asbestos mine without protective wear (Carroll, 2020). The media have been quick to focus on the 'dangerous' and 'extreme' nature of tourism to Wittenoom and tourists that ignore safety warnings and search for artefacts to take home as souvenirs. Images online support these statements, with people often posing in front of the warning signs and holding 'trophies' of riebeckite (which is the fibrous form of one of the types of asbestos mined in Wittenoom) (Carroll, 2020). In the first two and half months of 2019 there were 29 different Instagram stories of tourists visiting the area that year (Zaunmayr, 2019). De Poloni (2018) even reported that some WA tourism operators were offering guided tours.

While media reports appear to disapprove of such tourist behaviour, the simple act of reporting it creates awareness of the location, potentially instigating further tourism. Examining posts from Instagram and other social media accounts it is clear that travelling to Wittenoom is sensationalised and 'newsworthy', with several news outlets publishing headlines such as, "Wittenoom visitors dicing with death" (The West Australian, 2021); "The tourists posting Instagram selfies from WA's abandoned asbestos mine site Wittenoom" (Christmass, 2020); "Fears Insta fame driving tourists to WA's deadly cancer town" (Zaunmayr, 2019) (to which, 7News Perth posted on Facebook "INSTA-IDIOTS"); and

"'Australia's Chernobyl': Instagram users warned over outback 'ghost town'" (Carroll, 2020). These articles (and others) provided material from social media accounts displaying hashtags of #ghosttown; #blueasbestos; #abandonedplaces; #ghostly; #australiaschernobyl; #danger; #creepy; #derelict; and #deathbydust; and one Instagram user used the light-hearted caption "WittenDOOM" (Christmass, 2020; Scott, 2019; Zaunmayr, 2019; Carroll, 2020). The promotion of these tags provides intrigued readers with an avenue of research, and potential tourism.

Given the ongoing life-threatening danger posed to tourists visiting Wittenoom, various strategies have been suggested to deter tourists. For example, there are numerous warning signs that seem to do little to deter tourists, indeed, it has been suggested that such signs just increase the enticement to the 'mystery':

> Saying, 'Danger, do not enter', it's like having a bag of lollies in the cupboard and saying, 'Kids, don't eat these lollies'. People are still going to do it. (Bodie Norman cited in Birch & Gorman, 2021).

As noted, one of the strategies to decrease tourism has been to relocate local residents and demolish the town buildings. With the passing of the Wittenoom Closure Bill, the media were quick to publish articles with headlines "Last remaining Wittenoom properties to be demolished in bid to deter danger-seeking tourists" (Brookes, 2022). However, others believe that the government's desire to close and demolish the town will attract "a new wave of tourists to the site" by increasing its notoriety and the desire to take "eerie travel shots" for Instagram (Scott, 2019, para. 9).

There are also discussions to create a memorial to the victims of the mines at a non-lethal site. The Asbestos Diseases Society of Australia (ADSA) created an online petition to create support for a permanent memorial to be erected in Karijini National Park. The memorial will serve a dual purpose: first to memorialise through featuring the names of those who lost their lives to asbestos-related diseases; and second, to act as a deterrent to tourists considering entering the area and exposing themselves to asbestos (Newton, 2021). When the memorial is constructed, space will be left for the inevitable victims that continue to emerge from Wittenoom, including tourists. As the CEO of ADSA, Melita Markey, has stated: "Sadly, we know the death toll from Wittenoom won't stop, until the visitors stop" (cited in The West Australian, 2021).

However, it is important to note that not all tourists to Wittenoom are 'dark' or 'extreme' tourists. Like other disaster sites, there are a range of reasons tourists will travel to the site. For example, despite the dire headlines about extreme tourism, many tourists travel to the area for the natural beauty including the gorges and the wildflowers. The town and its surrounds have been described as an "eerie beauty" (De Poloni, 2018) that attracts tourists and campers. Although such tourists may not be visiting for macabre motivations, the media have been quick to raise concerns that uneducated tourists are still in danger from the location (The West Australian, 2021).

Conclusion

Many sites of 'disaster tourism' were previously sites for leisure tourism – for example, many of the sites ravaged by bushfires normally attract visitors because of the natural beauty of the location. Once a disaster has occurred many tourists will avoid the area, or in some cases, be excluded from the area by emergency services or government officials (Tucker et al., 2017). While the initial exclusion of tourists is helpful in the immediate aftermath of the event, it also means that communities lose significant income that normally contributes to their economy. Further, disasters have a long-term impact on tourism infrastructure (Rucińska, 2016; Miller, Gonzalez & Hutter, 2017). As such, while there is growing research on making communities 'disaster resilient', there is also increasing evidence that some communities are diversifying their markets to include 'dark tourism' in an effort to ensure revenue comes into the local area. The media can help to attract tourists, as in the case of L'Aquila. However, unlike urban sites of disaster, there may be little else to hold the tourists interest in rural and regional locations resulting in tourists travelling into the disaster zone for limited periods, thus providing little contribution to the economic growth of the region. For this reason, formal tours can help benefit such communities, by ensuring that tourists contribute financially to the rebuilding of the site.

However, communities wishing to embrace dark tourism are faced with the dilemma of recovery – once the landscape returns to 'normal', any 'dark tourism' focusing on the disaster may be seen as 'staged' or 'forced', and therefore inauthentic:

> Thus, the challenge for tour operators is to identity new symbols, motifs, reimaging devices, and framing strategies that can reanimate the neighborhood as a destination and deliver an "authentic" experience even when visible reminders of the destruction are gone." (Gotham, 2017, p. 131)

In the case of the bushfires in Victoria, some of the community were willing to accept dark tourism, however the cessation of travel caused by COVID-19 quickly shut this avenue down. Communities can also suffer from fatigue with being constantly associated with a disaster, and tour companies may need to pivot to continue supplying tourists with interesting experiences. In most cases of disaster tourism, it is inevitable that tourism must change as the landscape does. However, some locations, such as Pompeii remain as constant disaster tourism sites, while others may choose to retain some sections or erect memorials to permanently mark the location. Biran et al. (2014) suggest that "some 'evidence' of the physical destruction should be maintained" to motivate continued tourism (p. 13).

Disaster tourism can (although not always, as in the case of Wittenoom) provide tourists a safe environment where they can experience a sense of danger, fear and excitement (Martini & Buda, 2020, p. 685). Further, disaster tourism allows tourists an opportunity to explore ontological insecurities, existential anxieties and social identities. As Zhang (2022) has written:

> Climate change, a global pandemic (COVID-19), bushfires and wildfires in Australia and California will see this era remembered as one of unprecedented human crises, making individuals existentially uncertain and ontologically insecure. (p. 1)

Tourists visiting these sites (or museum exhibits) are likely to rethink their everyday life, self-identity, family identity and human identity (Zhang, 2022, p. 2). As Lennon and Foley (2000) originally outlined, dark tourism offers visitors a platform from which to view death and destruction; to confront anxieties surrounding mortality and the 'evil' of atrocities. Importantly, as Marton et al. (2020) note, a "catastrophe tourist does not equal to a deviant person" (p. 137). Some tourists will engage in risky behaviour, such as those chasing storms or visiting towns like Wittenoom. As such, while the motivation may be for adventure, exploration, mystery – or, as many journalists were quick to point out in regard to Wittenoom, in search of the best Instagram selfie – these types of tourists need to consider the risk to themselves and others in the community. For example, if a tourist travels to an area that has not yet been deemed 'safe', they could endanger their own lives as well as rescue workers who may need to help them.

Disasters are spectacles that attract and intrigue people. Tourists may be motivated by curiosity; by a desire to see the impacts of disaster first-hand; wanting to help; or to confront their own mortality. Despite these range of motivations, the media tend to focus on those related to dark tourism, where "people gravitate towards the unusual and the dangerous" leading to "rubbernecking" behaviour (Leyla, 2023, para. 16). The publicization of sites of disaster inevitably creates interest in an area; however, this does not mean that tourists travelling to such sites should be labelled as 'dark' or 'deviant' - many people travel to see if they can help, or to reflect on the fragility of life. Even curiosity, as Leyla (2023) notes, is a natural aspect of humanity, and as such, curious tourists that behave in a respectful and careful manner can provide economic and emotional support for communities.

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